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Security Council

Seventy-second year

Provisional

7955th meeting
Tuesday, 30 May 2017, 3 p.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Rosselli	(Uruguay)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Inchauste Jordán
	China	Mr. Wu Haitao
	Egypt	Mr. Aboulatta
	Ethiopia	Mr. Alemu
	France	Mrs. Gueguen
	Italy	Mr. Cardi
	Japan	Mr. Bessho
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Umarov
	Russian Federation	Mr. Safronkov
	Senegal	Mr. Barro
	Sweden	Mr. Skoog
	Ukraine	Mr. Vitrenko
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Rycroft
	United States of America	Mrs. Haley

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/445)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/445)

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Stephen O'Brien, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2017/445, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016).

I now give the floor to Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: The cruel conflict in Syria continues to tear families apart, inflicts brutal suffering on the innocent and leaves them pleading for protection and justice. I readily acknowledge that there have been reports of a significant drop in violence in some areas of the country. However, such steps forward continue to be counter-weighed by the reality of a conflict that continues to devastate the civilian population.

On 16 May, 30 children and women were gravely injured in a heinous attack by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) on besieged neighbourhoods in Deir ez-Zor as they were lining up for water. In addition, more than 100 civilians, many of them women and children, have fallen victim, in recent weeks. to the escalating counter-ISIL airstrikes, particularly in the north-eastern governorates of Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor. Millions more are in the line of fire, facing crushing poverty and alarming physical danger. Tens of thousands of children have been killed, and for those who have survived until today, the outlook remains bleak. Children have been forcibly detained, tortured, subjected to sexual violence, forcibly recruited and in some cases executed. Close to 7 million children in Syria live in poverty. Nearly 1.75 million children remain out of school and another 1.35 million are at risk of dropping out. Approximately 7,400 schools — one in three across the country — have been damaged, destroyed or otherwise made inaccessible. Morover, even if the schools were intact, many would be unable to open, with almost a quarter of the country's teaching personnel no longer at their posts.

Outside of Syria, hundreds of thousands of Syrian children are left to face an uncertain and traumatic future on their own. They have become stateless, abandoned by the world but for the generosity of neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey, as well as Egypt. How are those children meant to function as adults? What future do those children have, given that they will often grow up to be illiterate, orphaned, starved, traumatized and maimed? What future does a country have when its next generation is a lost generation? For those suffering children, what is at stake is not politics; it is their lives and their futures. It is their innocent voices and their suffering that need advocating.

Astana produced a promising step. It produced a memorandum between the three guarantors — Iran, Russia and Turkey — on the creation of four de-escalation areas. It is a memorandum that stipulates, in no uncertain terms, that fighting must significantly decrease and unhindered humanitarian access must be enabled to those four areas. The areas essentially encompass all of the besieged locations except for those in Damascus and Deir ez-Zor. With that said, too many agreements that could have saved lives and reduced suffering have failed in the past.

Therefore, let me be clear. The agreement simply must succeed. We owe it to the 2.6 million people that we estimate to be in the four de-escalation areas. The United Nations stand ready to sit with all parties involved to make it a workable agreement — one that will make a tangible difference to civilians on the ground, one that facilitates the delivery of life-saving assistance based on the needs assessments of the United Nations without constant interference, reduced beneficiary numbers, the removal of medical and other essential items out of spite, bureaucratic restrictions and procedural and physical roadblocks.

We also must not lose sight of the fact that all over Syria, millions of people, in locations inside and outside the four de-escalation areas, continue to suffer because they lack the most basic elements needed to sustain their lives. We must not stand silent while violence flares up elsewhere in the country and parties continue to use starvation, fear tactics and the denial of food, water, medical supplies and other forms of aid as methods of war.

As this Council knows, in recent months, restricted access and increased attacks resulted in a number of so-called 'evacuation' agreements in the communities of Al-Tal, Daraya, Al-Adamiya, Khan al-Shih, Wadi Barada, eastern Aleppo, Madaya, Zabadani, Foah and Kefraya. In that past few weeks, thousands more have been moved from the besieged Barza and Al-Kabun neighbourhoods of Damascus and the besieged Al-Waer neighbourhood in the city of Homs to Idlib and Jarabulus in rural Aleppo.

The evacuations have followed years of intense airstrikes, shelling and sniping. The tactics are all too obvious — make life intolerable and make death likely; push people to choose between starvation and death or fleeing on green buses to locations that are just as unsafe. There needs to be accountability for such actions. Starve and surrender tactics represent a monstrous form of cruelty to impose upon a civilian population. We have seen it happen numerous times already — as I said, in Homs, Moadamiya, Al-Waer, and elsewhere. In fact, Darayya and Zabadani are already devoid of their civilian population. That may very well be the fate of hundreds of thousands more people still trapped in besieged locations across the country.

Evacuations are, however, only the beginning of a new set of challenges for both those who are forced to leave their homes and host communities. Travelling mostly to Idlib and northern rural Aleppo, those displaced now find themselves in an increasingly precarious environment. The capacity in those areas to support additional displacement is reaching its limit. In Idlib alone, there are over 900,000 displaced people, which places significant strain on local communities and resources. While the situation has quieted since the memorandum on de-escalation was signed, any increase in fighting — attacks by the Government of Syria, or fighting among groups inside of Idlib, for instance — would be catastrophic for those already stressed communities.

In fact, in many corners of the country, the protection space is shrinking, humanitarian conditions are worsening and the level of despair is rising. That is not due to insecurity or poor infrastructure, but rather due to increasingly strict limitations by local authorities, non-State armed groups, as well as terrorist organizations, along with the actions of some neighbouring countries. I call on members of the Council to use their influence to see that those actors respect humanitarian principles and allow the unfettered delivery of aid. We are also greatly concerned at cross-border restrictions and regulatory impediments imposed on the non-governmental organization community operating in northern Syria and are troubled by increasing reports indicating that internally displaced persons fleeing al-Raqqah Governorate are being kept for prolonged periods in screening camps and subjected to restrictions on their movement by the self-proclaimed democratic self-administration in north-eastern Syria.

We need to see a step-change in access to the increasingly dire situation in north-eastern Syria. Rather than restrictions, we need an opening of space in order to respond. With approximately 100,000 people displaced due to fighting around Raqqah since April, access is needed now through every possible modality. We need to see restrictions eased for those operating in the area. We need to see increased cross-border and cross-line access for humanitarian assistance into the area, including land access from Aleppo. I call on all those with influence over the parties involved to act now. Further delays or restrictions will only result in the continued suffering and death of civilians.

For cross-line inter-agency convoys, administrative delays on the part of the Syrian Government in the approval of facilitation letters and convoy plans continue to hamper our efforts. Every month, thousands of facilitation letters are readily signed for convoys headed to Government-controlled areas. Yet, in cross-line areas, we have only been able to secure facilitation letters for seven convoys under the April-May access plan, which has allowed us to reach 266,750 people in need. That is out of 1 million people that we requested under the bi-monthly plan. As a result, we are essentially down to one cross-line convoy per week to reach those who are most in need, with only one besieged location — namely Duma in eastern Ghouta — reached by road during the April-May period.

Compared to 2016, when we deployed 50 cross-line convoys through May, today we stand at 18 crossline convoys in 2017. In addition, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent also delivered three cross-line convoys without the United Nations, which reached 136,500 people in hard-to-reach areas during that period. Moreover, the removal of life-saving medicines and medical supplies such as surgical kits, midwifery kits, and emergency kits has continued unabated, with nearly 100,000 medical supplies refused or removed from convoys since the beginning of 2017.

In addition, and as everyone here knows — and as the Secretary-General highlighted in last week's open debate on the protection of civilians (see S/PV.7951) — attacks on hospitals and other health facilities have become commonplace in Syria. About 20 have occurred every month between January and April this year, making for an average of one attack every 36 hours and turning Syrian hospitals into death traps. Such attacks and restrictions are not only violations of international law and Security Council resolutions, they are deliberate and cowardly acts aimed at the sick, injured and infirm, at unborn children and pregnant women, and at the elderly and young children — those who are least able to protect themselves and most in need of care and assistance.

The denial and delay of access, particularly for people in besieged areas, is a political calculation and a military tactic. This much is clear in Syria. We may speak about the practical elements of delay and denial — facilitation letters, inspections, checkpoints — but these are simply the manifestation of a mindset and approach by the Government of Syria that uses civilian suffering as a tactic of war. We have seen that when the political will exists, the humanitarian imperative to deliver, based on assessed need, is possible. Facilitation letters are signed, items are not removed by inspectors and checkpoints allow safe passage.

So I call on the Council to take all necessary steps to see that the will to ensure that humanitarian-aid deliveries are in their rightful position — which is outside any military or political calculations — and that they are restored, totally impartially. The delivery of aid is not a request, it is a demand. It is the law, and denying, refusing or frustrating it is and must be a red line that is not to be crossed. Denial and delays of assistance contravene Security Council resolutions and international humanitarian law. They must end. I urge the Council to act to ensure that its resolutions are implemented. Any prevarication will result in further deaths and more suffering for civilians. Humanitarian relief cannot be viewed as an optional element to be occasionally provided. It must go where it is needed and when it is needed, not where it is allowed and when it is convenient.

As I have said numerous times before, we remain committed and ready to deliver aid through all possible modalities for people in desperate need, whoever and wherever they are. However, the bottom line is that the real extent of progress cannot be measured by ad hoc deliveries to besieged communities once or twice, or every so often. The bottom line is that we have been wasting too much of our time literally begging for facilitation letters; too much time arguing at roadblocks, pleading for trucks to be allowed to pass without a sniper taking a shot and for medical items not be removed.

I do not come here today to seek favours. Calling for humanitarian actors to be allowed sustained access to all people in need throughout Syria is not a favour. Calling for an end to the removal of medical items from convoys is not a favour. Calling for all parties to the conflict to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure is not a favour. Seeking to prevent children from being buried under piles of rubble in their basements and schools is not a favour. Medicine for the sick and food for the starving are not favours. These are the common precepts, the bedrock, of our shared humanity, and the foundations of international humanitarian law, and they must represent an unflinching call to all people's fundamental decency. I call on all those with influence on the parties to reinforce that message and to take action.

In conclusion, I would like to send my very best wishes to everyone observing the holy month of Ramadan. For Muslims in Syria, the region and across the world, it is a time for charity, contemplation and community and a time for peace and forgiveness. Let us all sincerely hope for an end to violence for this period and beyond. Let us all sincerely work to achieve the objectives of the Astana memorandum, so that the attacks and bureaucratic impositions can come to an end once and for all, and so that the United Nations and its humanitarian partners can sustainably reach the hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped behind the current front lines.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. O'Brien for his briefing.

I now give the floor to those members of the Security Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. Skoog (Sweden): I would like to thank Under-Secretary-General O'Brien for giving us a very clear and sombre picture of the situation on the ground, and for being very clear about the demands that he, as a humanitarian actor, is making, very legitimately.

I would also like to pay tribute to the United Nations and to Mr. O'Brien's staff and partners, who are doing very admirable work on the ground in very challenging circumstances. I would also like to particularly thank him for bringing up the situation of the 6 million children in need in Syria. Children are being killed and maimed in indiscriminate attacks on a daily basis. They are callously targeted in the schools and hospitals where they seek shelter and, perhaps, a modicum of normality in their otherwise shattered lives. A whole generation of Syrian children have had their childhood stolen from them. We commend the efforts of UNICEF and its partners in responding to their needs, and we emphasize the importance of helping them to access their right to education and the psychosocial support they need.

The overall level of insecurity within Syria remains difficult to comprehend for those of us on the outside. The Syrian people continue to face danger and the threat of death every day. Every avenue must now be vigorously pursued to end the violence, and we therefore welcome the recent reduction in violence, mainly in the four de-escalation zones, as a result of the most recent meetings in Astana. We are nonetheless concerned about the military offensives being conducted outside those zones, primarily by the Syrian regime. It is essential to ensure that de-escalation in one set of zones does not result in an escalation in violence or the siege of other areas.

One of the primary sources of suffering for those in besieged areas is a lack of access to even the most basic needs, such as food. Humanitarian access to areas besieged by the Syrian regime in April and May has been deplorable, as we just heard, with only one convoy, to Duma, getting through, and that despite the decrease in violence. It is clear that a systemic change in the approval process is needed and long overdue. We therefore renew the call we have made on several occations to Damascus to provide safe, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access to all in need. We also urge the Syrian authorities to grant permission for humanitarian agencies to use the road between Aleppo and Qamishli, which has opened up for commercial traffic.

The Duma convoy shows that access can be achieved with Russia's active engagement. My key message today is that I urge the Astana guarantors' working group to prioritize implementing the humanitarian provisions of their memorandum. We call on them to initiate a dialogue with the United Nations and its partners as soon as possible to agree on streamlined access procedures for the four de-escalation zones. As we heard today, the United Nations is ready to engage and has the capacity to deliver. If humanitarian agencies are granted unimpeded access to those zones they could reach all of the towns besieged by the regime except one, which would be a significant breakthrough. As a co-penholder, Sweden has continued to engage with all the relevant stakeholders and partners in order to seize this opportunity. Expectations for the guarantors to deliver on their commitments are high.

We are also concerned about the fact that armed opposition groups, listed terrorist groups and Kurdish local administrations are increasing restrictions to access in Idlib and elsewhere. We urge those with influence on them to use it to bring a halt to that trend. I would also like to underline that increased humanitarian access, including in the de-escalation zones, is critical to sustaining the Astana process and improving the conditions for achieving results in Geneva. The only way to end this humanitarian crisis, of course, continues to be a political solution, and we urge everyone to intensify their efforts in support of the next round of talks in the United Nations-led Geneva process.

On Thursday of last week, Mr. President, we gathered in this Chamber under your presidency to hold an open debate on the protection of civilians (see S/PV.7951). Many of us spoke about the situation in Syria, where, as the Secretary-General has said, there are no events in recent history that compare to the current protection crisis. We reiterate our concerns about the forced displacement of civilians to areas where there is a severe lack of protection for them. Any evacuation of civilians must be safe and voluntary, and to a place of their choosing. We remind all parties involved of their obligations under international humanitarian law.

Civilian casualties are no longer seen as a consequence of this conflict. Civilians and civilian infrastructure such as medical facilities are targeted as objectives to gain military advantage, particularly by the regime side. Despite resolution 2286 (2016), there have been over 400 attacks on medical facilities since the conflict began, with 30 hospitals reportedly attacked in April alone. This fundamentally undermines international humanitarian law. It is now incumbent on the Council to intensify our efforts to halt this trend and to build on the consensus during Thursday's important debate that civilians in armed conflict must be protected.

Mr. Aboulatta (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to express my thanks to Mr. O'Brien for his comprehensive briefing to the Security Council. I thank him in particular for focusing on children today. Millions of Syrians continue to suffer, whether it be upon the anvil of the war raging in Syria or because they were forced to leave their homes with their families to live in refugee camps. Indeed, among the suffering are children born in the past few years who have only known camps as home.

The crisis continues to rage and the Syrian people continues to suffer, which the reports of the Secretary-General describe in detail. We see no end on the horizon. I would like to express our appreciation to all those working to deliver emergency assistance in Syria and renew Egypt's call to all parties, Syrian and international alike, to ease humanitarian access through facilitating procedures and providing full support to the United Nations and its partners so that they can safely reach those in need, particularly in besieged areas.

In the same context, we call on the States designated to be guarantors of the de-escalation zones under the memorandum of understanding recently signed in Astana to make every possible effort to implement the humanitarian terms of the memorandum. At the same time, we welcome the diminishing intensity of confrontations in the areas set up under the memorandum. We hope this will also be reflected in improved humanitarian access, while we know full well that safe and lasting humanitarian access under the memorandum will be a true humanitarian achievement on the ground with respect to besieged areas.

Six years have passed since the Syrian crisis began. First, it was an internal crisis, but it quickly became a proxy war. Malicious terrorist groups have spread in a wholly unprecedented way. Syrian land has become a safe haven for tens of thousands of foreign terrorist fighters who will continue to threaten the region, indeed the world, for years to come. It is perhaps important to stress anew that the danger posed by the threat of terrorism in Syria is very real; it cannot be underestimated. This phenomenon did not come about as a result of conditions on the ground. Rather, it is a phenomenon supported, financed and armed by parties with a direct interest in spreading chaos and extremism. Despite the unprecedented number of parties to military operations in Syria, and despite the fact that fighting terrorism is one of the most important objectives of these operations, the presence of interested parties does not reflect a unified view on how to deal with the threat or how to stop the financing and support of terrorist groups, which is a subject that needs to be reviewed.

It is easy to continue delving into the details of the humanitarian issues before us. It is easy to continue condemning the fall of civilians and the targeting of hospitals and schools. It is easy to demand easier humanitarian access. However, experience shows that if we stop there, we will not put an end to the tragedy on the ground in the country. The only way to end the humanitarian suffering of Syrians is to reach a comprehensive political settlement in accordance with the Geneva accord and resolution 2254 (2015) with a view to preserving Syria's unity and sovereignty on its land.

I would therefore call on all members of the Security Council — and renew my call on the joint chairmanship of the International Syria Support Group — to initiate a frank dialogue on the political process in Syria and on how to combine the various initiatives into a comprehensive approach to the crisis that leads to an end of the humanitarian crisis and serves the aspirations of the Syrian people to democracy and freedom in a unified country, one that chokes off terrorism and its supporters.

Mr. Bessho (Japan): I would like to thank Mr. O'Brien for his briefing.

In the 30 days since the previous Security Council meeting on the humanitarian situation in Syria (see S/PV.7931), we have heard about ongoing difficulties and continuing tragedies, but at the same time we have also received some positive news, even if, as I said, the overall situation continues to be dire. On the political side, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura convened the

sixth round of talks in Geneva. In the area of the cessation of hostilities, the three guarantors of the Astana process agreed on the memorandum of understanding on the four de-escalation zones. With respect to humanitarian access, the United Nations inter-agency convoy delivered food and medical items to eastern Ghouta, which was a much-awaited development.

In addition to the developments I just mentioned, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) has been regularly exchanging information and seeking solutions that are possible in the short term. As a member of the ISSG and as the humanitarian co-penholder, Japan has been making efforts to convince the Syrian Government to provide facilitation letters and allow access to United Nations inter-agency convoys. Unfortunately, these individual efforts cannot overcome the fact that humanitarian access is neither systematic nor consistent.

Mr. O'Brien noted two months ago that successful access has always been the result of humanitarian workers' patient negotiation and use of one or two influential channels. We are aware that the Syrian Arab Red Crescent has been such a channel and has pushed for expanded access. However, it is essential that the Security Council itself together with the ISSG undertake serious and coordinated efforts to expand discrete work into truly effective action that results in full and good faith implementation of the relevant Security Council resolutions. Japan will continue to seek solutions to the pressing humanitarian situation, in cooperation with the other humanitarian co-penholders. We ask that all actors, especially in the Security Council and with political influence, do the same.

The Astana process guarantors are attempting to reduce the fighting in the four de-escalation zones, which include the besieged and hard-to-reach areas where most of the people are located, as Mr. O'Brien pointed out today. Our expectations on this front are high because so much of the humanitarian crisis is concentrated in these areas. Expanded information and coordination with United Nations humanitarian actors and the Security Council by the guarantors are needed in order to make these efforts as effective as possible.

Mr. Rycroft (United Kingdom): I thank Mr. Stephen O'Brien for his powerful briefing and for all he does on this crucial issue. We are meeting today exactly five months since a ceasefire was declared in Syria. Sadly, as Stephen has set out, it is a ceasefire that exists in name only. The past five months have seen continued fighting, continued atrocities and continued destruction. Throughout civilians have been maimed and killed, starved and besieged. In towns like Khan Shaykhun, they have been exposed to the very worst of humankind.

Like many others in this Chamber, we cautiously welcomed the ceasefire and the Astana agreements on de-escalation zones. After six years of fighting, we are all ready to support any genuine effort to bring an overdue end to the bloodshed. But the fact is that the Astana plans have done little to help the people of Syria, instead, so far, they have done a great deal to help the regime and its allies. The guns have fallen silent only where it has suited them. The guns have been deafening elsewhere. So, in some places, yes, there has been an overdue reduction in the violence, but only where it suits the regime.

We need only ask the people of Dar'a governorate, one of the four so-called de-escalation zones, what the ceasefire feels like on the ground. Last week barrel bomb after barrel bomb, air strike after air strike, rained down on opposition-held areas there. Is that what the regime means by ceasefire? Is that what it means by de-escalation? And just as the attacks have continued, so have the sieges. At the end of April, the United Nations estimated over 620,000 people were living under siege in Syria, the overwhelming majority in towns and villages besieged by the regime and its allies. How can anyone claim there is a ceasefire in place when the equivalent population of Las Vegas is being besieged? Quite simply, one cannot.

Going hand in hand with the continued attacks and continued besiegement is the continued failure to improve humanitarian access. As Stephen said, in the past two months, there has been just one aid delivery to an area besieged by the regime and that delivery was too little too late, providing supplies for the bare minimum of the population.

It does not have to be this way. The United Nations is standing by ready to deliver aid and medicine to those in critical need. It knows the routes it will take. It has the assurances it needs from the opposition and it has the mandate to act. All of us around this table have agreed in countless resolutions that access must be granted, but instead the United Nations teams are forced to wait — not for aid, not for supplies, but instead for the regime's letters of approval, letters that never arrive. So the children continue to go hungry and

the sick and wounded continue to die in pain. This is not about bureaucracy or paperwork; these are the cold calculating actions of a regime that chooses to starve its fellow Syrians into surrender. One can see why the United Nations judges that this kind of behaviour constitutes war crimes.

In light of these continuing atrocities, it is clear that the guarantors of the Astana process need to do more, so much more, to make the ceasefire and de-escalation zones a reality. This must mean a genuine end to the violence — a ceasefire in deed and not just in thought. It must mean effective and impartial monitoring mechanisms, ideally reporting to the Security Council, so that those who violate the ceasefire are named and held to account. It means sustained humanitarian access for the United Nations and its partners, with the United Nations being allowed to assess what each de-escalation zone needs. Those with influence over the regime must ensure that this access is given. It is long overdue.

Above all, if there is to be a long-term peace in Syria, there has to be full implementation of resolution 2254 (2017), as our Egyptian colleague has just said, and there has to be justice. There has to be justice for the people of Khan Shaykhun, for the people of Aleppo, for the people of so many places across Syria who have endured for so many years. Without these steps, there simply is not a credible plan. There is just the fiction that we have today. It is a fiction where ceasefire exists and yet bombs still fall. It is a fiction that has endured for too long.

Mrs. Gueguen (France) (*spoke in French*): The humanitarain situation, which Mr. Stephen O'Brien eloquently described, remains tragic and very worrying in several ways. I will highlight at least five of them.

First of all, the violation of the prohibion of the use of chemical weapons — which should have been absolute — continues to outrage our conscience. On 26 April, France sent to the Security Council its analysis of the circumstances surrounding the use of chemical weapons on 4 April in Khan Shaykhun. This analysis was carried out by our experts and is irrefutable. It estalishes without at doubt the invovlement of the Syrian armed and security forces.

Secondly, the violence persists on the ground, despite the fact the signing of the 4 May agreement. The general high level has gone down in recent weeks, but the incidents that took place, particularly in the areas of Hama, Ghouta and Dar'a, show how precarious this seeming reduction in violence is. The guarantors of the truce undertook their responsibility to oversee its implementation. We therefore call upon the guarantor States of the Astana process, in particular Russia and Iran, to effectively impose the full cessation of hostilities on the Syrian regime. Improving the situation on the ground is essential to the success of the negotiations with a view to political transition in Geneva under the aegis of the United Nations.

The third matter of concern is the humanitarian situation, which is far from improving. The regime continues to block the access of humanitarian convoys and to besiege opposition-held settlements. More than 620,000 people still live in besieged areas. France reiterates its call for the immediate lifting of these sieges. Assistance must go to all the people in need, wherever they are in the Syrian territory, in accordance with humanitarian principles.

Fourthly, the implementation of local evacuation agreements concluded by the regime, after having starved and besieged civilians for many years, is generally carried out without international supervision and leads to large-scale forced displacements of the population. As the Secretary-General underscored in his report, such displacements could constitute war crimes or even crimes against humanity. We therefore demand that these agreements, which are imposed by force, cease; that evacuations be carried out in accordance with international humanitarian law; that civilians be treated with dignity; and, finally, that the ceasefire be fully respected.

Fifthly, the situation of the detainees is of particular concern. The Caesar files discuss it. According to reliable information, 500,000 people have been imprisoned by the Bashar Al-Assad regime since 2011. The reported information on the possible use by Damascus of a crematorium to conceal the extent of the summary executions perpetrated at the Sednaya prison must be considered with utmost attention .

We are constantly repeating in this Chamber that the Damascus regime must respect its international obligations and allow full, safe, unconditional and unhindered access for the United Nations and its humanitarian partners to people in need throughout the Syrian territory. Its supporters must put pressure on the regime in that regard.

The Syrian regime continued refusal to issue facilitation letters for the loading of convoys is

wholly unjustifiable. That responsibility lies squarely on Damascus, which continues to deny access to humanitarian actors and has used starvation as a war strategy. We demand that the Syrian regime authorize the humanitarian convoys to reach people in need. Attacks on hospitals, medical facilities and humanitarian convoys, as well as school buildings and homes persist. The Secretary-General has reiterated his appeal to refer the case to the International Criminal Court. We must shed all possible light on those innumerable violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

In the face of that tragic assessment, it is more urgent than ever to usher in a political transition in the framework of the Geneva negotiations. France fully supports the negotiation process in Geneva under the auspices of the Special Envoy, — in accordance with resolution 2354 (2017) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) — as the only way to put an end to the suffering of the Syrian people and the humanitarian tragedy unfolding before our eyes. More than ever, we reiterate the urgency of reaching a political solution that will culminate in a genuine transition in Syria.

Mrs. Haley (United States): I thank Under-Secretary-General O'Brien for his briefing. Last week, I stood in the no-man's land between Syria and Turkey where trucks with life-saving humanitarian aid begin their perilous journey to reach desperate men, women and children in Syria. In the course of five days in Jordan and Turkey, I witnessed the generosity of those countries in providing Syrian refugees health and educational services. I met dedicated teachers and doctors who, with the help of the United States and the United Nations, are working to shape a better future for Syrians. I sat and spoke with refugee children and met the counsellors who are helping them deal with the trauma that has marked their young lives.

Overwhelmingly, the displaced Syrian men, women and children with whom I spoke want to go home but, tragically, the violence and brutality that led them to flee their homeland has continued since we last met. There is no peace in Syria, only continuing, appalling suffering. There is no home to which those desperate people can return. According to one Syrian human rights group, in just the month of April, the Al-Assad regime killed nearly 500 civilians. That brings the total number of Syrians killed by the regime in just the past five months to more than 2,000. The same group reports that the total number of civilians killed by all parties during this period is more than 3,800.

The Syrian Government continues to imprison tens of thousands of its people. It subjects them to such violence and inhumane conditions, including torture and sexual violence, that those who manage to survive suffer devastating and lasting damage. Their families suffer as well. But the most persuasive indicator of the continuing hell that is life in Syria is what we have learned this past month about what has been built inside Al-Assad's notorious Sednaya prison. Amnesty International calls the prison a "human slaughterhouse". Survivors report being approached by wardens inside with ropes and knives. They are then given a choice — kill friends and relatives, also in the prison, or be killed themselves. The evidence comes from a combination of photographs of structural changes in the prison and estimates of the horrifying rate of killings behind its walls. It has led us to conclude that the Al-Assad regime has constructed a crematorium in the prison to dispose of victims' bodies.

That is an appalling discovery. Even if Russia and Iran had no direct role in the construction of the crematorium, they have either aided in or passively looked away as the Al-Assad regime commits atrocities that are reminiscent of history's worst war crimes. It is hard to fathom yet another regime so soulless that it has to devise a more efficient method of disposing of all the dead bodies it generates, but that is where the evidence leads us. We need Russia to use its influence over the Al-Assad regime to bring an end to those atrocities. Even those inside Syria who managed to avoid Al-Assad's prisons do not avoid suffering. The bombings of hospitals and schools continue unabated.

I want to thank Under-Secretary-General O'Brien for calling our particular attention to the staggering and unacceptable impact of this war on children. Countless Syrian children have lost family, friends and other loved ones, and witnessed first-hand the unspeakable horrors of war. For the more than three million Syrian children under the age of six, many now orphaned, war is all they have ever known.

As a recent report by Save The Children highlights, children wake up at night screaming from reliving those horrors as they fall asleep. They wet their beds; some have lost the ability to speak, while others tell their friends and families they would rather be dead than live another day hungry and afraid. Others turn to drugs as a way to cope with what they have endured. We witnessed first-hand the effects on those children, with many refusing to leave the house or struggling with fear

of loud noises. The United Nations, non-governmental organizations and assistance providers have done an admirable job trying to assist those children, but the systems and structures that exists to provide care and support for children are eroding around them.

One in three schools in Syria have been destroyed, damaged, or are being used as a shelter for the displaced or for military purposes. More than half of Syria's public health facilities have closed and more than 75 per cent of Syrian households' children have to help support their families, with many of them as the sole breadwinners. The psychological and physical toll on Syrian children could cost us an entire generation if action is not taken. I applaud the United Nations for recognizing the challenges facing those children and recognize the United Nations-led No Lost Generation approach to provide counselling and education to school-age Syrians, other refugees and vulnerable Jordanians who cannot always access formal education.

But the truth is no child should have to endure any of that. The Council is in a position to chart a different course for the children of Syria and give them the future they dream of and deserve. Ultimately, the best and only way to truly support those kids is by ending the conflict and getting them the assistance they need. Unfortunately, delivery of humanitarian aid continues to be blocked by the Government. The regime continues to put up bureaucratic roadblocks to the delivery of life-saving food and medicine. No one is fooled by the games they are playing. They are making the choice to starve their own people for political gain and are being supported by Iran, as Russia looks the other way.

The message I took to the refugees I visited last week was that the United States will never give up working to ease their suffering, but we have to be honest — what they want, what they need is to return home — but they will never have a home to return to until there is peace in Syria. In addition to the political solution, we must start to focus on the development needs of host countries, as well as the transition for Syrians to go home.

I was at a Turkish camp and one of the refugees came up to me and asked that we remember that they need our support. He said that Al-Assad is a brutal leader and that "we are happy when we listen to you and when you are talking about us. Please do not forget about the Syrian people." That must be our constant, overriding and unfaltering purpose.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I wish to thank Under-Secretary-General O'Brien for his briefing.

Recently, thanks to the joint efforts of the international community, the political settlement of the Syrian issue has gained momentum. Recently concluded Geneva talks have made progress, while the last round of Astana dialogue has created conditions for the consolidation of the ceasefire and the scaling up of humanitarian relief. China commends the mediation efforts of the United Nations and the efforts by Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkey and Iran in advancing the Astana dialogue, and hopes that it will be conducive to the alleviation of the humanitarian situation in Syria and the promotion of a political settlement.

Despite recent difficulties on the ground, United Nations humanitarian agencies continue to dispatch relief convoys to relevant areas in Syria. China commends those efforts and urges parties in Syria to effectively implement relevant Security Council resolutions, observe the ceasefire agreement and actively coordinate with United Nations humanitarian relief operations by providing rapid, safe and unhindered access. The international community should implement as soon as possible the outcomes of the Brussels international conference on Syria by providing assistance to Syria and to relevant countries in the region.

Political settlement is the only viable way to completely ease the humanitarian situation in Syria. Special Envoy De Mistura has announced that the next round of Geneva talks will be held in June. The parties concerned should adhere unswervingly to diplomatic efforts and continue to support the role of the United Nations as the main mediator and the work of the Special Envoy; jointly encourage the parties in Syria to participate constructively in the next round of Geneva talks, under the principle of Syrian-owned and Syrian-led and take part in dialogue and negotiations, in the quest for a comprehensive, lasting solution that is acceptable to everyone.

Attacks launched by terrorist organizations in Syria severely impede international relief efforts. China calls on the international community to step up counter-terrorism coordination efforts, adopt unified standards and resolutely combat all terrorist organizations identified by the Security Council.

China continues to support the alleviation of the humanitarian situation in Syria and the political settlement of the Syrian question. The Special Envoy of the Chinese Government on Syria attended the most recent round of Geneva talks to promote dialogue for peace. China stands ready to continue to play a constructive role in reaching a comprehensive, impartial and appropriate solution to the Syrian issue at an early date.

Mr. Cardi (Italy): I would like to thank Under-Secretary-General O'Brien for his briefing.

Today, once again we have heard a sobering briefing, which underscores that the humanitarian situation in Syria has in no way improved. While there are indications of a reduction in violence since the adoption of the Astana agreement, fighting continues in key areas and there is still no meaningful humanitarian access to civilians living in besieged and hard-to-reach communities. A considerable amount of humanitarian assistance is given through regular programming and cross-border assistance — the latter being provided without the need for the regime's approval, thanks to authorization by the Security Council.

But where needs are greatest, such as in areas besieged by the Syrian regime, there has been no improvement for many months. On the contrary, compared to last year's levels, the number of cross-line inter-agency convoys for besieged or hard-to-reach locations has, in fact, significantly decreased. And where convoys are allowed to enter, medical and surgical items are still removed by the regime, in what amounts to a despicable practice that is contrary to international humanitarian law, as well as to Security Council resolutions and International Syria Support Group Ministers' agreements.

Besieged eastern Ghouta remains an area of deep concern, in particular for the health needs of the population. Besieged civilians in eastern Ghouta need to be reached by the United Nations and other humanitarian partners. One single convoy for a limited number of beneficiaries is not the change of policy that is needed. In Al-Waer and Barze in eastern Ghouta, we call upon the Syrian Government to allow the United Nations to carry out assessment missions and to monitor the ongoing so-called evacuations that may amount to forced population transfers to opposition-held areas. Access by the United Nations should also be guaranteed in the so-called liberated areas, such as Wadi Barada, where, since rebels were evacuated, no monitoring or humanitarian missions have been possible.

We are also worried about reports of increasing restrictions for the United Nations and other humanitarian agencies and organizations operating in Idlib and north eastern Syria, where assistance has been curtailed, leaving many in need. We remain concerned about the possibility that chemical arms will be used again in Syria. In that respect, accountability for their use, including at Khan Shaykhun, must remain priority objective of the Council.

The general decrease in violence that has followed the Astana agreement is a step forward. Yet, some areas, such as Idlib, eastern Ghouta and Dar'a, have seen an increase in fighting, as the parties jockey for positions and as the regime tries to strengthen its presence in key strategic territory. The reduction in violence should have prompted an increase in humanitarian access. As we have seen, that has not been the case so far.

In that regard, through the implementation of the Astana agreement of 4 May, we expect that substantive and sustainable results can finally be achieved on the humanitarian front. In that framework, the United Nations must have an active role in the implementation of the humanitarian dimension of the Astana agreement, ensuring that assistance can be provided, according to the United Nations impartial assessment of needs, and that people who wish to leave or require medical evacuation can do so — all with respect for humanitarian law and principles. We would not like to see the creation of parallel tracks on humanitarian issues, without the direct involvement of the United Nations.

Finally, ensuring a real ceasefire and safe, immediate and unhindered humanitarian access to all people in need remains the priority. Realizing rapid humanitarian dividends for the population will also help to create the conditions conducive to progress on the political track in Geneva, under the auspices of Mr. Staffan de Mistura and in the framework of resolution 2254 (2015).

Mr. Alemu (Ethiopia): I wish to express appreciation to Under-Secretary-General Mr. Stephen O'Brien for his briefing. As usual, it was very exhaustive and clear.

We also express our appreciation to the United Nations and its partners for their sustained efforts in trying to deliver the much needed humanitarian

assistance to those in need, under extremely difficult circumstances.

As described in detail by the Under-Secretary-General, the humanitarian situation in Syria remains a source of serious concern. The fighting has continued unabated, leaving many civilians killed, injured and displaced, and destroying civilian institutions and infrastructure. Nevertheless, we note that since the signing of the de-escalation memorandum by the three guarantors, Russia, Turkey and Iran, violence has decreased in the de-escalation zones. Any effort that reduces violence in Syria should be welcomed and we appreciate the efforts of the guarantors to implement the ceasefire agreement. As Under-Secretary-General O'Brien has said, it has to succeed. It is vital that the reduction of violence translate into safe, sustained and rapid humanitarian access, which will help to address the continued challenge of reaching out to those in need of urgent assistance.

Only seven inter-agency convoys have been allowed in April and May and their capacity to deliver aid is underutilized. That should certainly change and implementing a simplified facilitation procedure will be instrumental in enhancing aid delivery. In that regard, the cooperation of the Syrian Government is indeed critical in addressing administrative challenges in order to improve humanitarian access. Ultimately, the long-term solution to the humanitarian situation depends on the Syrian-led political process, under the auspices of the United Nations. In that connection, we continue to support the Astana process and the Geneva talks, which complement each other.

No doubt, as we discussed last week, a political solution may not be easy to achieve over the short term, but it is the only sane option. That is why we believe that even small and incremental progress should be welcomed. That is also why it behoves all the Syrian stakeholders to be fully committed to stopping the war and ending the suffering of the people. Let me say that we align ourselves with what the representative of Egypt said regarding the danger that terrorism represents in Syria. It bears responsibility for complicating the situation in the country. Third parties have played a big role in the development of those complications. As memebrs of the Council know, the success of the political track in Syria hinges on the concerted efforts of countries of the region, along with major Powers with influence on the parties. Most importantly, it hinges on the unity of this Council. If we succeed here, then we will be taking a huge step forward in addressing the humanitarian crisis in Syria.

Mr. Barro (Senegal) (*spoke in French*): My delegation thanks Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Stephen O'Brien, for introducing the thirty-ninth report of the Secretary-General on the humanitarian situation in Syria (S/2017/445) and for his enlightening briefing. Through him, Senegal again pays tribute to the ongoing sacrifices made by the emergency medical personnel acting on behalf of Syrian civilians, who are suffering through their sixth year of conflict.

My delegation recalls the devastating impact of the conflict on the children of Syria. In particular, I should like to focus on the fate of the 2.4 million children who have been displaced from their homes and the 280,000 children who still living in besieged areas. In that regard, we echo the appeal launched by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, calling for an investigation into crimes committed against children, including through active cooperation with existing mechanisms, such as the Fact-finding Mission in the Syrian Arab Republic, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism on international crimes committed in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Despite the efforts under way, the cessation of hostilities triggered by the Astana process, which initially elicited hope and optimism, remains fragile. Unfortunately, we are still witnessing a large number of Syrian victims, in addition to the ongoing destruction of public infrastructure, such as schools, health-care facilities and markets, in violation of international humanitarian law and resolution 2286 (2016). The United Nations has registered 30 attacks against health-care facilities and two against schools.

Despite the current difficult situation, the United Nations and its partners continue to provide humanitarian assistance in extremely difficult conditions to the people most in need, whose numbers have seen a substantial reduction of some 20,000 people in 13 besieged areas of the country. However, there still remain 624,000 people in need. In that regard, my delegation notes that there has been an improvement

in humanitarian access to some areas that have been besieged by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), thanks to locally signed agreements. We remind all parties to the conflict of their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law to ensure access to those providing assistance, including medical supplies, in safe, unrestricted, unconditional and unimpeded conditions via the most direct routes, in line with the relevant Security Council resolutions.

That having been said, my delegation reiterates its call on the relevant authorities of Syria to continue delivering facilitation letters, which are essential to the optimal implementation of the programmes of the humanitarian agencies of the United Nations and their partners. We hope that the cessation of hostilities will spread throughout the country and that, better yet, it will translate into a significant improvement in the delivery of humanitarian assistance under United Nations coordination. My delegation therefore welcomes the efforts made by the guarantors of the Astana process, namely, Russia, Turkey and Iran, in particular the memorandum of understanding whereby they are committed to creating de-escalation zones in specific areas of the country so as to facilitate the cessation of hostilities, humanitarian assistance and a return to conditions conducive to the peace process under United Nations auspices.

My delegation reiterates its encouragement to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, through the Fact-Finding Mission, in its efforts to shed light on the use of chemical weapons in the attack on Khan Shaykhun in order to hold accountable the perpetrators of that heinous act, whose many victims included children. We reaffirm the priority of fighting and violent extremism terrorism, including ISIL and the former Al-Nusra Front, pursuant to a global strategy that respects international humanitarian law and relevant Security Council resolutions.

In conclusion, we reiterate our faith that a negotiated political solution is the only way out of the crisis in Syria, which has had devastating consequences, in line with the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and resolution 2254 (2016) and under the auspices of the United Nations. We welcome the sixth round of negotiations led by Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, which will promote the ongoing exchange of information on pertinent issues, such as constitutional reform, the political transition, national integrity and the fight against terrorism.

Mr. Umarov (Kazakhstan): We express our deep appreciation for the briefing by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Stephen O'Brien, on the tragic humanitarian situation in Syria.

We commend and appreciate the efforts made by the United Nations, under the leadership of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and his colleagues in the field, to supply food, fuel and potable water to areas in need in Syria, as well as his efforts to organize the evacuation of civilians. We also support the humanitarian efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and United Nations agencies working on behalf of the Syrian people. At the same time, we are of the view that humanitarian assistance should not be politicized, as the lives of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, especially children, depend on the timely delivery of humanitarian aid by parties engaged in the humanitarian sector. We ask the guarantors of the ceasefire — Russia, Turkey and Iran — to continue their important work towards reconciling the conflicting parties. It is gratifying to know that the number of settlements that have joined the reconciliation process has increased to 1,500. We welcome that process.

Kazakhstan believes that the war cannot be considered over until the last mine is cleared. We therefore support Russia's appeal to create an international coalition to demine Syrian territory. My delegation also considers that it would be expedient to establish a fund to finance the specialized commercial companies that would carry out such work. We strongly condemn attacks on schools, hospitals and other medical facilities, which only worsen an already difficult humanitarian situation in the country. We call on the parties to the Syrian conflict to comply with international humanitarian law and refrain from actions aimed at destroying civilian infrastructure, water-supply facilities and medical and educational institutions.

Kazakhstan wishes to draw the attention of the Council to the trend of mass forced resettlement of civilians, which often happens on a false basis of compassion. Such practices can result in artificial changes to the population's composition, aggravating interreligious differences among citizens, and can threaten Syria's territorial integrity, according to the Geneva communiqué of 30 June 2012 (S/2012/522,

annex), which is the basis for the possibility of achieving a political agreement as soon as possible.

Kazakhstan is concerned about the fate of detainees being held in Syrian prisons. We call on the Syrian Government to allow United Nations representatives to investigate the allegations of violence against prisoners, including those in the Saydnaya prison. We share the view that there can be no military solution to the Syrian conflict and that it will be essential to settle it through political means in the spirit of the negotiating processes in Geneva and Astana. We urge the parties to the conflict and the guarantors to observe the provisions of the 6 May memorandum on establishing de-escalation zones in Syria. We believe that the memorandum can help to advance a political settlement. While we have been informed that the cessation of hostilities between Government forces and the armed opposition groups that have already joined the ceasefire regime is visible within the boundaries of the de-escalation zones, no initiative aimed at establishing peace in the conflict zones can be successful or effective without the Security Council's support.

In Syria, time is precious and counted in human lives. Procrastination means death for countless innocent citizens, particularly children. The Security Council has a special duty to end the bloodshed there, but for more than six years it has been unable to agree on measures to contain this brutal civil war, which has seriously affected not just the lives of millions of peaceful Syrians but the entire region. We need unity to achieve success, and we should strive for that.

Mr. Vitrenko (Ukraine): We too are grateful to Mr. O'Brien for his sobering and chilling account of the humanitarian situation in Syria. This month, unfortunately, seems to be no different from previous ones, since the humanitarian track continues to be dominated by devastating negative trends, as we just heard. While there are many of them, today I would like to touch on three areas of particular concern.

First, there are still more than 600,000 people under siege. Of those, 82 per cent are besieged by the regime's forces. At the same time, the issues of sustainable humanitarian access and lifting the sieges are an integral part of the Astana memorandum and the concept of de-escalation zones. The question, therefore, is about how much real progress has been made here. Has Damascus shown any willingness to follow through on the memorandum? The answer lies in the dreadful sentence we just heard from Mr. O'Brien — that civilian suffering is a tactic of war.

Secondly, we are alarmed by the most recent UNICEF report on the suffering of millions of children in Syria, as well as the horrifying information just provided by the Under-Secretary-General. More than 2 million children are living in besieged or hard-to-reach areas around Syria, with little to no humanitarian aid. Such a reckless and deliberate strategy carries fundamental risks for the long-term stability of not just Syria and the Levant but the entire Middle East. Depriving these children of basic necessities is equivalent to creating the best possible environment for the recruitment campaigns of Al-Qaida and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham. Leaving young Syrians without hope and turning them into a lost generatio, will end up creating a long-term safe haven for terrorists at the very heart of the region.

Lastly, we are concerned about the continuing forced displacement of civilians in the eastern districts of Damascus and other regions of Syria, which is leading to devastating demographic and humanitarian consequences. Such actions may amount to violations of international humanitarian law and an attempt to change the demographic composition of modern Syria. These and other outrages committed against civilians by the Syrian regime with the help of its sponsors, first among them the Russian Federation, must come to an end.

Mr. Inchauste Jordán (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank Under-Secretary-General O'Brien for his report and once again reiterate our full support for the work he has been tasked with.

The fighting that has resulted in death and destruction in Syria has now been going on for more than six years. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, about 13.5 million people have been forced to flee their homes for safety. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has reported that more than 620,000 people remain under siege in Syria and about 5 million have fled the country between 2011 and March of this year. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs believes that over the same period about 6.6 million more people, half of them children, have been internally displaced within Syria.

The humanitarian situation in Syria remains critical. In April alone, according to the Secretary-General's report issued on 23 May (S/2017/445), there were around 30 attacks on medical and educational facilities and personnel. We are very concerned about the fact that despite the ceasefire that has been implemented in accordance with resolution 2336 (2016), attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure by the parties to the conflict still continue.

Bolivia insists firmly that agreements reached in the framework of the ceasefire must be abided by and respected, and we reiterate that all the parties involved are obliged to ensure the safety and integrity of everyone caught up in the conflict. We also welcome the most recent message, on 26 May, from Mr. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, in which he urged all the parties to the conflict to take much greater care to distinguish between legitimate military targets and civilians, and to fulfil their obligation to protect the population, saying that

> "[t]he same civilians who are suffering from indiscriminate shelling and summary executions by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant are also falling victim to the escalating air strikes, particularly in the northeastern governorates".

On behalf of Bolivia, I would like to reiterate our appreciation for the work being done to alleviate the humanitarian crisis facing the Syrian people by the staff of various humanitarian aid agencies and organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Syrian Red Crescent, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF and the International Organization for Migration. We would also like to highlight the important work that the Russian centre for the reconciliation of opposing sides in the Syrian Arab Republic has been doing, both in ensuring security for the deployment of humanitarian assistance and in evacuating people from areas where there have been armed clashes. In that regard, we would like to remind the parties to the conflict once again that they must allow unconditional access for humanitarian assistance. They should ensure and protect its security and integrity and refrain from targeting humanitarian-assistance convoys as military objectives. We call on the parties to the conflict to intensify efforts to guarantee humanitarian access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas.

We believe that as long as military tactics take precedence over politics, there can be no lasting peace and that the civilian population, especially women and children, will be exposed to unnecessary suffering as a result. We also firmly condemn all acts of terrorism as criminal and unjustifiable, regardless of motive and wherever, whenever and by whom they are committed. We reaffirm the importance of ensuring that all States combat this human scourge by every possible means, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and their other obligations under international law.

Lastly, we reiterate that the only way to resolve this conflict is through an inclusive political process, organized and led by the Syrian people, and we therefore reaffirm our support for the progress that has been made in the Astana and Geneva meetings and express our fervent hope that those dialogues can help us achieve a definitive and lasting peace.

Mr. Safronkov (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We are grateful to Mr. O'Brien for his briefing. We highly value the work being done conscientiously by humanitarian workers in fulfilment of their mandate.

As a result of the memorandum of understanding concluded in Astana on 4 May on the de-escalation zones, the intensity of the armed clashes in Syria has significantly diminished. This is a fact that has been acknowledged by many within Syria and outside. To assert the contrary is to intentionally undermine the achievements of the Astana process, which is bearing tangible results and is providing impetus in the political negotiations in Geneva. We intend to pursue the Astana process, and we are grateful to the leadership of Kazakhstan for the political and organizational assistance it has offered.

At the same time, we condemn the renewed mortar shelling of the Russian embassy in Damascus on 22 May, which was undertaken from the terrorist-controlled Jobar region. It is unfortunate that our Western partners had nothing to say about this today. We would kindly like to ask our partners to work with the people they sponsor to make sure that they stop targeting Russian diplomats.

We have not failed to notice the fact that the humanitarian nature of the reports is being diluted. Instead of an objective analysis of the humanitarian situation, we are seeing calls for transferring the Syria matter to the International Criminal Court and the need for a discussion of the problem of assisting

a very questionable investigator mechanism. The reports should paint a broader picture of the work that helps to bring a peaceful life back. For example, something should be said about demining, which is part of a humanitarian action plan, and generally about the efforts being made to normalize the situation in the country. Also worth mentioning is the 2016 report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on Syria, which very clearly sets forth the country's needs in terms of making progress in its reconstruction and describes how the United Nations can help and is helping. Russia is one of the leading donors to UNDP projects in Syria.

The approaches to the humanitarian situation in Syria display a very serious methodological flaw. In order to eliminate this flaw, one has to accept that the issue of humanitarian assistance to Syria cannot be reduced to the issue of blockages and hard-to-reach regions. The reality is that most of the people who need assistance live in areas that are controlled by the Government. Special attention must be paid to regions that have been liberated from fighters, in particular those settlements where local truce agreements have been reached. We cannot share the negative assessment of this kind of practice. Those who criticize the practice should not forget that as result of our efforts on local truces, we have managed to save tens of thousands of human lives. Furthermore, peaceful inhabitants are returning to those regions.

The agenda is now focused on de-mining and on ensuring that the infrastructure functions normally and that social services and facilities are in place and available. In order to improve the quality and volume of humanitarian access, normal working contact with Syrian authorities at various levels is needed, as acknowledged by many United Nations personnel. We have been very active to that end. However, Russia's capacity in this area is not unlimited, especially since as can be seen in today's meeting, we are not exactly supported by everyone here. Others need to establish normal working contacts with the Syrian Government. We think that a special role could be played here by the humanitarian troika of the Security Council since it decided to work on this difficult matter.

The description of the incident that took place in Khan Shaykhun cannot withstand scrutiny. The main problem today is that neither the Technical Secretariat of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons nor the Joint Investigative Mechanism have taken the steps necessary to carry out their mandate, including by sending specialists to Khan Shaykoun and the Shairat air base, even though we raised the issue with them. Damascus is ready to work with them but, despite the fact that it has been brought up, the Secretary-General's report (S/2017/445) does not say a word about the issue.

On another note, the report says that the last route into eastern Ghouta was closed in late April, but we were told long ago that this region had been completely blocked. The difficulties with delivering supplies to Damascus suburbs have been intentionally exaggerated, following the direction of fighters associated with terrorist groups and non-governmental organizations that are at their beck and call, including the infamous White Helmets, in order to exert additional pressure on the authorities in Damascus.

But the activities carried out by the White Helmets are very well known to the United Nations and in the region. It turns out, for example, that the the hospitals and clinics that many non-governmental organizations have claimed to have been destroyed are intact and working. The Al-Wafidin corridor has allowed for the provision of food supplies, which has caused the prices for foodstuffs at local markets to drop considerably. It is the constant clashes among illegal groups that are hindering humanitarian activity, inflicting suffering on innocent people.

How long will we have to wait before those who support and train the Syrian armed opposition can knock some sense into those people? We cannot help but be worried by the fact that we are seeing a rising number of victims among civilians in the areas controlled by the United States-led opposition. If they promote fairness and justice, why did they fail to mention that?

We have pointed out the illegal nature of these operations on many occasions. They violate the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria, which we have strongly emphasized in many Security Council resolutions. We cannot agree with the approach of some of our partners to humanitarian situations in hot spots of the Middle East. One set of ideas is applied when considering Syria, a completely different set of ideas when it comes to Iraq, and yet a third set for Yemen. What does this mean? Does it mean that different kinds of people live in Middle East? Are there three different classes of citizens living there? Let us at least be honest.

I must state in conclusion that regardless of the tenor of our meetings, whether it is an acute polemic or legendary diplomatic politeness, our Western partners exploit these public meetings to make unjustified accusations against us, which verges on insulting. The only question we hear is: What should Russia do about Syria? What we are doing is obvious, overt and known to all. We constantly inform the Council about what we are doing. Why do our colleagues not report to the Security Council about what their countries are doing to bring a political settlement closer?

We call once again on Council members to refrain from the kind of fruitless and inappropriate rhetoric whose rules Council members have flouted when flinging unacceptable provocations on us and other countries. We propose instead that we concentrate on making specific contributions to ending the war in Syria and assisting in its reconstruction. We stand ready to work together there.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I shall now make a statement in my capacity as representative of Uruguay.

Since we joined the Security Council last year, our delegation has maintained that, as elected members of the Council, it is our responsibility to provide our opinion before the membership at all briefings. This is why we are very pleased that, this afternoon, all the other members of the Security Council chose to speak in public about the situation in Syria. I must confess that we were left with a bitter aftertaste when this morning (see S/PV.7954), as we discussed Yemen — a humanitarian tragedy that in terms of scale is of even greater magnitude — only two delegations expressed their opinion before the membership.

We thank Under-Secretary-General Mr. Stephen O'Brien for his comprehensive briefing, and we recognize and thank him once again for his continued efforts and those of his entire team deployed in the field in difficult conditions, who risk their lives on a daily basis to try to help the civilian population of Syria.

There is little left to say about the Syrian conflict that has not been said previously in this Chamber. Uruguay's position has been clear and consistent since we became elected members of the Council last year; if members pay attention, they will recognize phrases and expressions that have already been used on numerous occasions in the past. However, our primary objective is and must continue to be reaching a political solution, which will make it possible to put an end to this crisis and put a peaceful transition on track in Syria, one that is negotiated by all Syrians and with the support of the international community.

To that end, we trust in the good offices of Special Envoy Mr. Staffan de Mistura, in order to pursue the rounds of intra-Syrian negotiations in Geneva, which will gradually make it possible to reach common points to give shape to a new political chapter in Syria. We believe that the Astana process is also critical as we seek to reduce the levels of violence in the Syrian territory. We support the guarantors' efforts to consolidate the ceasefire and gradually extend it to other parts of the country. However, we are concerned that the United Nations is not participating in this initiative, which would provide guarantees of respect for essential principles of international humanitarian law, such as the prohibition of forced displacements and the freedom of movement to enter and leave the so-called safe zones.

Of course, the political process and the end of hostilities are only two of the steps to ensure that the page is turned in Syria. The third and equally important step is the humanitarian aspect. Despite some improvements in access, we are still very far away from an encouraging result, which would make it possible to allieviate the suffering of the Syrian civilian population. We must not forget the millions of refugees and displaced people who sooner or later will have to return to their homes or what is left of them. We continue to call for immediate, sustained and unimpeded access to all besieged and hard to reach areas. However, the priority objective should be the lifting of all sieges, which is unjustifiable in the twenty-first century.

For Uruguay, the protection of civilians in Syria and in any other conflict is an absolute priority. It is immoral to distinguish between civilians because they support one side or other another or because they are located in a certain area controlled by one or another of those parties. The provision of justice for the hundreds of thousands of innocent victims of this conflict is essential for lasting peace in Syria and for this country and all its people to overcome the horrors of this war. As long as we cannot ensure accountability for the serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, which have been committed by all parties to the conflict since 2011, those responsible will feel that they can continue committing them with impunity. This applies both to Syria and Yemen.

That is why Uruguay supported the creation of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, and hopes that it will soon be able to begin its work. We also support the request of the Secretary-General for the situation in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court. Similarly, my delegation believes that the same thing should be done with the situation in Yemen.

April was a particularly difficult month for Syrian civilians, first with the chemical weapon attack in Khan Shaykhun and a few days ago with the brutal attack on civilians being evacuated in the framework of the four towns agreement. We still do not know who was behind both incidents, which were war crimes. We trust that those reponsible will be quickly identified so that they may be brought to justice. With regard to local ceasefire agreements, we reiterate that any evacuation that takes place must ensure the security of civilians, the provision of humanitarian assistance and create the conditions for people who wish do so to return to their homes as quickly as possible.

One year after the adoption of resolution 2286 (2016), we continue to witness the destruction of hospitals and health centers in Syria. It is outrageous that the parties have flouted its provisions, depriving thousands of people of the right to medical care and leading to hundreds of victims among medical and health-care staff. This practice is repeated in schools, markets and all kinds of civilian infrastructure. We condemn these attacks in Syria, Yemen and wherever they may take place. They are war crimes and those responsible must be identified and brought to justice.

In conclusion, Uruguay affirms that the full and effective implementation of some measures, such as the consolidation of the cessation of hostilities, the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, and the easing of bureaucratic processes for humanitarian access, which can make a great difference in the life of the Syrian people for whom the Council has been demanding concrete action to be taken on a monthly basis. We trust that, as on previous occasions, the Council can overcome its differences and take its responsibility for international peace and security.

I now resume my functions as President of the Security Council.

I now give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Mounzer (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I hope that you, Mr. President, will be patient and listen to our comments on the briefing by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs.

The Government of my country has considered the thirty-ninth monthly report of the Secretary-General (S/2017/445). It expresses its concern and regret over the approach of the report's authors, which in many aspects reflects the positions of certain States, parties and Governments that deliberately distort reality and deny the basic causes for the situation and humanitarian crisis in Syria, and the emergence and spread of armed terrorist groups with the support, financing and guidance of known Governments.

These Governments — some of which, unfortunately, are permanent members of the Security Council — impose unilateral economic measures against the Syrian people in order to bring pressure to bear on the people by denying them various basic resources necessary for a decent life. In this regard, I note that this morning the Government of my country has addressed two identical letters to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council containing its detailed response to the report.

The Government of my country finds it strange that the authors of the report, who should focus on humanitarian issues, continue to include issues that have nothing to do with humanitarian affairs and do not reflect the reality on the ground. Allow me to share some key observations of the Syrian Government on some of this erroneous information.

The authors of the report insist on sending political messages adopted by the Governments of certain countries. They accuse the Syrian Government of laying siege to areas of Syria. The entire Syrian people is under siege and exhausted on both the living humanitarian levels, due to the unilateral economic measures imposed by the Governments of certain Member States — led by the United States and the European Union — that shed crocodile tears and bemoan the situation of the Syrian people.

As for the areas that the United Nations has classified as under siege, the Organization is operating under erroneous information. Rather, armed terrorist groups that lay siege to those areas use civilians as human shields and deny them the humanitarian aid they are sent. Those groups sell humanitarian provisions at exorbitant prices — in Aleppo, for example. The report uses the term "forced displacement" to describe national reconciliation measures being implemented in large swaths of Syria — a dangerous posture that reflects the positions of Governments that continue to insist on covering for and protecting armed terrorist groups in Syria. Those national reconciliation measures have restored security, stability and normalcy to many Syrian towns and cities. In that regard, we stress that the reconciliation efforts are transparent operations through which the Government offers armed groups the option to lay down their weapons and regularize their status without any legal charges brought against them or they can relocate to another area. That does not apply to civilians, of course, who can go back to their daily lives after the armed groups leave. We do not yet know why some senior officials of the Secretariat feel concerned about Syrians regaining their homes, security and normal lives.

My Government regrets that the authors of the report have adopted, fully and in a biased way, the American version regarding the use of chemical weapons in Khan Shaykhun. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic has repeatedly made clear its principled position rejecting the use of chemical weapons or toxic chemicals, which is considered to be a crime against humanity and an immoral, heinous act that cannot be justified in any circumstance for any reason or anywhere. We reiterate that we have not used chemical materials in our war against terrorism. The incident in Khan Shaykhun was contrived by terrorist groups, led by the Al-Nusrah Front, with the guidance and support of the Governments of some States, in order for Syria to take the blame for the use of such weapons.

The authors of the report insist on remaining silent on the catastrophic consequences of the illegal air strikes carried out by the self-styled international coalition. Those strikes have targeted infrastructure such as dams, bridges, hospitals, schools and oil facilities. Moreover, it is well known in the Council and to world public opinion, that such arbitrary strikes in northern and eastern Syria have claimed dozens of innocent civilian victims. We also regret that the Secretariat continuously promotes the actions of that coalition and deliberately turns a blind eye to the illegal nature of the coalition and the fact that it is violating international law and the Charter of the United Nations. The coalition was not created at the request of the Syrian Government or pursuant to a Security Council resolution.

The authors of the report continuously try to justify the aggression of the Turkish military regime — which backs some armed terrorist groups in Syria — against the sovereignty of the Syrian Arab Republic. It is therefore quite odd that the report states that Turkey's closing of the Nusaybin/Qamishli border crossing is but temporary and for security reasons, whereas in fact the closure began in December 2015 and only seeks to increase the suffering of the population of the Hasakah governorate.

The Government of Syria has to date provided its people with around 75 per cent of its humanitarian needs. We reaffirm our steadfast policy to ensure the provision of humanitarian aid and to meet the needs of Syrian citizens everywhere, without any discrimination. Thus, we have welcomed the proposal put forward by the United Nations and the Government of Japan to facilitate regular monthly humanitarian convoys.

I would also like to make certain observations on the humanitarian situation.

First of all, my Government again stresses the obligation of the United Nations to coordinate with it, in a spirit of partnership and cooperation, all aspects of the humanitarian efforts with Syria. We must not submit to the political agendas of certain Member States or to the demands and allegations of other actors, which the authors of the report erroneously identify as "local authorities".

Secondly, the authors of the report must hold the Al-Nusrah Front terrorist group and its allied armed terrorist groups responsible for blocking humanitarian aid because those groups target peaceful residential areas, block vital roads, besiege several locations and use civilians as human shields.

Thirdly, the Syrian Government rejects the allegations and accusations levelled against it by the authors of the report concerning procedural and logistical measures concerning the delivery of humanitarian aid to unstable zones. We reaffirm that we comply with all agreements on the provision of

aid, including medical supplies, to civilians in need. Moreover, we want to ensure accuracy in determining the number of people who receive that aid, and that the supplies do not end up in terrorist hands. Additionally, the Syrian Government has facilitated the delivery of more than 15 humanitarian convoys in April and May, in keeping with the monthly humanitarian convey agreement. We will continue to make efforts to ensure that more convoys can reach those zones.

Fourthly, the authors of the report do not address the failures of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Syria, which deliberately delays the operations of the convoys, allows the delivery of aid to some zones on a monthly basis to the exclusion of others, and refuses humanitarian access to zones requested by the Syrian Government. Moreover, the Office does not provide accurate numbers of the convoys that are being organized every month in order to underplay the role and efforts of the Syrian Government. Additionally, the Office and the authors of the report purposefully avoid mentioning the joint International Committee of the Red Cross-Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoys, and they include neither the actual numbers of convoys being organised based on prior approvals, nor the number of people benefiting from them.

Fifthly, the authors of the report cite the tragedy of civilians who fled Foah and Kafraya in a narrative way that it is far from describing the scale of that crime, despite the fact that the terrorist bombing of their buses in the Rashidin area in Aleppo city on 15 April claimed the lives of dozens of women and children and destroyed dozens of ambulances and buses that could not be replaced due to the economic siege imposed by Governments of certain Member States upon Syria.

Sixthly, the report continues to promote cross-border aid, most of which falls into the hands of the terrorist groups that are rampant in the areas, where such aid arrives.

The people of Syria continue to be the victims of the lies and hypocrisy within the Security Council espoused by the same group of States that do not wish to see an end to the crisis in Syria but want to continue to manage and invest in terrorism and in armed terrorist groups and impose an economic blockade on the Syrian people.

I now address my comments to the representative of the United States, who claimed earlier today that she was speaking on behalf of a Syrian refugee in Turkey. I speak here on behalf of millions of Syrians inside and outside Syria, who call on the Governments f France, the United States and the United Kingdom and on the Governments of regimes that support terrorism in Syria to stop exploiting the Syrian crisis to achieve their political schemes at the expense of the Syrians' interests. I call on them to lift the economic blockade on the Syrian people and to end air strikes on cities, the destruction of infrastructure and the targeting of civilians under the pretext of combating Da'esh, and to stop making up fictitious stories that are similar to cheap Hollywood movies.

I remind the United States representative and her colleague from France that the media in their two countries have questioned the fabricated evidence provided by the two countries on about the situation in Sednaya and Khan Shaykhun, yet no one has questioned the fact that the aircraft of the so-called international coalition kill hundreds of innocent civilians in Syria and Iraq.

Finally, my country, Syria, will continue to play a constructive role to ensure that the Astana and Geneva meetings are successful, in the context of its involvement in any genuine effort to put an end to the blood bath in Syria and to terrorism, and that will help us to find a political solution, on the basis of intra-Syrian dialogue, led by the Syrian people, without foreign interference or preconditions.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers.

Since this is the final meeting under the Uruguayan presidency of the Security Council, I would first like to thank my colleagues at the Permanent Mission of Uruguay to the United Nations. Without their support, we would not have been able to achieve so much during our presidency. It is the unseen workers at the permanent missions who make it possible for the Permanent Representatives and the Deputy Permanent Representatives to conduct their work. They provide much needed support, day after day, throughout the year, but in particular when a country holds the presidency of the Council. I sincerely thank and acknowledge them all.

Secondly, I would like to thank all of the Permanent Representatives present and their delegations for having made our work as easy as possible this month. I would also like to thank the Council secretariat for the technical and organizational support they continue to provide. I also thank the security personnel, whom we do not see but who nonetheless are part of our work. I would like to thank the sound engineers and all of the staff working in the Chamber and the consultations room. Last but far from least, I would like to thank our interpreters and translators, who are absolutely indispensable to our work.

I know that I speak on behalf of the entire Security Council in wishing the best of luck to the Plurinational State of Bolivia when it assumes the presidency of the Council in June.

I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 5.05 p.m.